

**KEYSTONE TO READING SECONDARY BOOK AWARDS 2024-2025**  
**ANNOTATED MIDDLE SCHOOL BOOK LIST**

***Duel*** by Jessixa and Aaron Bagby

Sixth grader Lucy loves fantasy novels and is brand-new to middle school. GiGi is the undisputed queen bee of eighth grade (as well as everything else she does). They've only got one thing in common: fencing. Oh, and they're sisters. They never got along super well, but ever since their dad died, it seems like they're always at each other's throats.

When GiGi humiliates Lucy in the cafeteria on the first day of school, Lucy snaps and challenges GiGi to a duel with high sisterly stakes. If GiGi wins, Lucy promises to stay out of GiGi's way; if Lucy wins, GiGi will stop teasing Lucy for good. But after their scene in the cafeteria, both girls are on thin ice with the principal and their mom. Lucy stopped practicing fencing after their fencer dad died and will have to get back to fighting form in secret or she'll be in big trouble. And GiGi must behave perfectly or risk getting kicked off the fencing team.

As the clock ticks down to the girls' fencing bout, the anticipation grows. Their school is divided into GiGi and Lucy factions, complete with t-shirts declaring kids' allegiances. Both sisters are determined to triumph. But will winning the duel mean fracturing their family even further?

(Graphic Novel, grades 6-8)

***Four Eyes*** by Rex Ogle and Dave Valeza

Sixth grade isn't as great as Rex thought it would be. He's the only kid who hasn't had a growth spurt, and the bullies won't let him forget it. His closest friend is unreliable, at best. And there's a cute girl in his class, who may or may not like him back. With so much going on, everything is a blur -- including Rex's vision! So when he discovers that he needs glasses, and his family can only afford the ugliest pair in the store, any hope Rex had of fitting in goes completely out of focus.

(Graphic Novel, grades 6-8)

***Good Different*** by Meg Eden Kuyatt

Selah knows her rules for being normal.

She always, always sticks to them. This means keeping her feelings locked tightly inside, despite the way they build up inside her as each school day goes on, so that she has to run to the bathroom and hide in the stall until she can calm down. So that she has to tear off her normal-person mask the second she gets home from school, and listen to her favorite pop song on repeat, trying to recharge. Selah feels like a dragon stuck in a world of humans, but she knows how to hide it.

Until the day she explodes and hits a fellow student.

Selah's friends pull away from her, her school threatens expulsion, and her comfortable, familiar world starts to crumble.

But as Selah starts to figure out more about who she is, she comes to understand that *different* doesn't mean *damaged*. Can she get her school to understand that, too, before it's too late?

(Realistic Fiction, grades 6-8)

***Hands*** by Torrey Maldonado

Trev would do anything to protect his mom and sisters, especially from his stepdad. But his stepdad's return stresses Trev—because when he left, he threatened Trev's mom. Rather than live scared, Trev takes matters into his own hands, literally. He starts learning to box to handle his stepdad. But everyone isn't a fan of his plan, because Trev's a talented artist, and his hands could actually help him build a better future. And they're letting him know. But their advice for some distant future feels useless in his reality right now. Ultimately, Trev knows his future is in his hands, and his hands are his own, and *he* has to choose how to use them. .

(Realistic Fiction, grades 6-8)

***Mexikid*** by Pedro Martin

Pedro Martin has grown up hearing stories about his abuelito—his legendary crime-fighting, grandfather who was once a part of the Mexican Revolution! But that doesn't mean Pedro is excited at the news that Abuelito is coming to live with their family. After all, Pedro has 8 brothers and sisters and the house is crowded enough! Still, Pedro piles into the Winnebago with his family for a road trip to Mexico to bring Abuelito home, and what follows is the trip of a lifetime, one filled with laughs and heartache. Along the way, Pedro finally connects with his abuelito and learns what it means to grow up and find his grito.

(Graphic Novel, grades 4-8)

***My Selma*** by Willie Mae Brown

As the civil rights movement and the fight for voter rights unfold in Selma, Alabama, many things happen inside and outside the Brown family's home that do not have anything to do with the landmark 1965 march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Yet the famous outrages which unfold on that span form an inescapable backdrop in this collection of stories about the everyday and the extraordinary. In one, twelve-year-old Willie Mae takes it upon herself to offer summer babysitting services to a glamorous single white mother—a secret she keeps from her parents that unravels with shocking results. In another, Willie Mae reluctantly joins her mother at a church rally, and is forever changed after hearing Martin Luther King Jr. deliver a defiant speech in spite of a court injunction.

Infused with the vernacular of her Southern upbringing, *My Selma* captures the voice and vision of a fascinating young person—perspicacious, impetuous, and resourceful in her ways of seeing the world around her—who gifts us with a loving portrayal of her hometown while also delivering a no-holds-barred indictment of the time and place.

(Non-fiction, grades 4-9)

***Plague Busters*** by Lindsey Fitzharris and Adrian Teal

Get to know the ickiest illnesses that have infected humans and affected civilizations through the ages. Each chapter explores the story of a disease, including the scary symptoms, kooky cures, and brilliant breakthroughs that it spawned. Medical historian and bestselling author Lindsey Fitzharris lays out the facts with her trademark wit, and Adrian Teal adds humor with cartoons and caricatures drawn in pitch black and blood red. Diseases covered in this book include bubonic plague, smallpox, rabies, tuberculosis, cholera, and scurvy.

(Non-fiction, grades 5-9)

***The Gray*** by Chris Baron

It's been a tough year for Sasha—he's been bullied at his middle school and his anxiety, which he calls the Gray, is growing. Sasha's dad tells him to "toughen up"—and he does, but with unfortunate, hurtful results. His parents and therapist agree that a summer in the country with his aunt might be the best medicine, but it's the last place he wants to be. He'll be away from his best friend, video games, and stuck in the house that reminds him of his beloved uncle who died two years earlier.

His aunt is supportive, and there are lots of places to explore, and even some potential new friends. When Sasha is introduced at a local ranch to a horse coincidentally--incredibly--nicknamed the Gray, he feels he's found a kindred spirit.

But his own Gray is ever-present. When one of his new friends disappears, Sasha discovers that the country is wilder and more mysterious than he imagined. He tries to muster enough courage to help in the search . . . but will the Gray hold him back?

(Realistic Fiction, grades 3-9)

***The Labors of Hercules Beal*** by Gary D. Schmidt

Herc Beal knows who he's named after—a mythical hero—but he's no superhero. He's the smallest kid in his class. So when his homeroom teacher at his new middle school gives him the assignment of duplicating the mythical Hercules's amazing feats in real life, he's skeptical. After all, there are no Nemean Lions on Cape Cod—and not a single Hydra in sight.

Missing his parents terribly and wishing his older brother wasn't working all the time, Herc figures out how to take his first steps along the road that the great Hercules himself once walked. Soon, new friends, human and animal, are helping him. And though his mythical role model performed his twelve labors by himself, Herc begins to see that he may not have to go it alone.

(Realistic Fiction, grades 3-9)

***The Lion of Lark-Hayes Manor*** by Aubrey Hartman

Poppy Woodlock believes in magic, but so far, she hasn't found any. It's been two weeks since her parents moved their family to Oregon to undertake their biggest project yet: revitalizing the once-grand Lark-Hayes Manor. Her older brother instantly found his place, but after being thrown into middle school midyear, Poppy is feeling...invisible. So she retreats to where she's always felt most at home: books and magic. And if the fantastic and supernatural exist, certainly they can be found in this mysterious old estate.

A late-night prowling leads Poppy to a desperate water nymph, with whom she strikes a dangerous bargain. In exchange for the thing she loves most—her favorite book—Poppy now has the secret of a lifetime: her very own flying lion. Sampson is exactly what she needs to prove magic *does* exist and, more importantly, that she is not to be so easily dismissed.

But the cost of ancient magic is astronomical. With every night Sampson grows, another book disappears, and Poppy soon faces the harrowing reality that without their favorite stories, the lives of everyone around her begin to unravel.

Fixing the chaos will require Poppy to be clever and bold, and even at her smartest and loudest, she's not sure it will be enough. But she has to try.

(Fantasy, grades 4-9)

***The Lost Year*** by Katherine Marsh

Thirteen-year-old Matthew is miserable. His journalist dad is stuck overseas indefinitely, and his mom has moved in his one-hundred-year-old great-grandmother to ride out the pandemic, adding to his stress and isolation.

But when Matthew finds a tattered black-and-white photo in his great-grandmother's belongings, he discovers a clue to a hidden chapter of her past, one that will lead to a life-shattering family secret. Set in alternating timelines that connect the present-day to the 1930s and the US to the USSR, Katherine Marsh's latest novel sheds fresh light on the Holodomor – the horrific famine that killed millions of Ukrainians, and which the Soviet government covered up for decades.

(Historical Fiction, grades 4-9)

***Warrior Girl*** by Carmen Tafolla

Celina and her family are bilingual and follow both Mexican and American traditions. Celina revels in her Mexican heritage, but once she starts school it feels like the world wants her to erase that part of her identity. Fortunately, she's got an army of family and three fabulous new friends behind her to fight the ignorance. But it's her Gramma who's her biggest inspiration, encouraging Celina to build a shield of joy around herself. *Because when you're celebrating, when you find a reason to sing or dance or paint or play or laugh or write, they haven't taken everything away from you.* Of course, it's not possible to stay in celebration mode when things get dire--like when her dad's deported and a pandemic hits--but if there is anything Celina's sure of, it's that she'll always live up to her last name: Guerrero--woman warrior--and that she will use her voice and writing talents to make the world a more beautiful place where all cultures are celebrated.

(Realistic Fiction, Novel in Verse, grades 4-9)

The Keystone to Reading Secondary Book Awards lists are created to give students a voice in the selection of the children's choice book awards presented each year at the annual KSLA Conference. The information presented in these annotations represents the thoughts and opinions of the reviewers and does not necessarily represent the viewpoints of the Keystone State Literacy Association. (The book descriptions have been taken from outside sources.)